



Asia: Ambitions of the middle class; Kazakhstan

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Abstract:

After months of cracking down on political dissent and independent-minded newspapers, the Kazakhstani authorities appeared by late last year to have finally gained the upper hand. An opposition party, Ak Zhol has managed to come up with 65,000 members and to be the first party to apply for reregistration. Ak Zhol is relatively moderate in outlook, with a focus on economic reforms, and appeals to Kazakhstan's growing middle class and new business elite.

Full Text:

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A new political force could trouble the president

AFTER months of cracking down on political dissent and independent-minded newspapers, the Kazakhstani authorities appeared by late last year to have finally gained the upper hand. Two leading opposition figures were sentenced to several years in jail, a restrictive law on political parties was passed by parliament, and a well-known journalist was severely beaten. Although the various opposition groups were shaken by these events, they did not crumble. They now seem to have a second wind.

An opposition party, Ak Zhol (White Path), was believed to be the target of a law that had raised the minimum membership requirement for a party from 3,000 to 50,000 members, seemingly an impossible target. It has now defied the odds by managing to come up with 65,000 members and to be the first party to apply for re-registration.

Ak Zhol is relatively moderate in outlook, with a focus on economic reforms, and appeals to Kazakhstan's growing middle class and new business elite. Its leaders, two former senior

government officials and a successful businessman, continue to believe that the country's autocratic system can be changed through reforms. President Nursultan Nazarbaev is believed to hold a personal grudge against them for not toeing the government line.

It might be worthwhile for him to keep an open mind. Although Ak Zhol's membership drive was directed at Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic population of 16.7m as a whole (of which barely half are Kazakhs), the overwhelming majority of the delegates at the party's congress last weekend were Kazakhs, not known for their political activism. This could ultimately be bad news for the authorities. Uraz Jandosov, Ak Zhol co-chairman and a former deputy prime minister, says that Kazakhs are becoming aware that it is up to them to do something to reform the system or be stuck with what they have.

By contrast, the demands made by the Republican People's Party, set up by another former prime minister, Akezhan Kazhegeldin, who has lived in exile for the past four years, are more radical. Mr Kazhegeldin has proposed to merge the party with another radical group, Democratic Choice, with the aim of working for "the removal of the shameful regime of personal authority and pervasive corruption" of Mr Nazarbaev.

The Ak Zhol leaders were among the co-founders of Democratic Choice. Their ideas and, not least, their financial clout made them so popular that they were joined by many parties and organisations. Unnerved, the authorities began persecuting the opposition.

Kazakhstan's economy is in better shape than those in the other ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia, and the country now also has a substantial middle class (by local standards). It is they who have grown dissatisfied with the lack of further growth opportunities--due in part, it is believed, to some sectors of the economy being controlled by members of the president's family. It would not be the first time a middle class produced important political change.

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